

CHAPTER VIII - A CLOAK WITH BEADS

On weekdays the women who passed the window were meagrely dressed; mothers in draggled winsey gowns, carrying infants that were armfuls of grandeur. The Sabbath clothed every one in her best, and then the women went by with their hands spread out. When I was with Hendry cloaks with beads were the fashion, and Jess sighed as she looked at them. They were known in Thrums as the Eleven and a Bits (threepenny bits), that being their price at Kyowowy's in the square. Kyowowy means finicky, and applied to the draper by general consent. No doubt it was very characteristic to call the cloaks by their market value. In the glen my scholars still talk of their school-books as the tupenny, the fowerpenny, the sax-penny. They finish their education with the ten-penny.

Jess's opportunity for handling the garments that others of her sex could finger in shops was when she had guests to tea. Persons who merely dropped in and remained to tea got their meal, as a rule, in the kitchen. They had nothing on that Jess could not easily take in as she talked to them. But when they came by special invitation, the meal was served in the room, the guests' things being left on the kitchen bed. Jess not being able to go ben the house, had to be left with the things. When the time to go arrived, these were found on the bed, just as they had been placed there, but Jess could now tell Leeby whether they were imitation, why Bell Elshioner's feather went far round the bonnet, and Chirsty Lownie's reason for always holding her left arm fast against her side when she went abroad in the black jacket. Ever since My Hobart's eleven and a bit was left on the kitchen bed Jess had hungered for a cloak with beads. My's was the very marrows of the one T'nowhead's wife got in Dundee for ten-and-sixpence; indeed, we would have thought that 'Lisbeth's also came from Kyowowy's had not Sanders Elshioner's sister seen her go into the Dundee shop with T'nowhead (who was loth), and hung about to discover what she was after.

Hendry was not quick at reading faces like Tammas Haggart, but the wistful look on Jess's face when there was talk of eleven and a bits had its meaning for him.

"They're grand to look at, no doubt," I have heard him say to Jess, "but they're richt annoyin'. That new wife o' Peter Dickie's had ane on in the kirk last Sabbath, an' wi' her sittin' juist afore us I couldna listen to the sermon for tryin' to count the beads."

Hendry made his way into these gossips uninvited, for his opinions on dress were considered contemptible, though he was worth consulting on material. Jess and Leeby discussed many things in his presence, confident that his ears were not doing their work; but every now and then it was discovered that he had been hearkening greedily. If the subject was dress, he might then become a little irritating.

"Oh, they're grand," Jess admitted; "they set a body aff uncommon."

"They would be no use to you," said Hendry, "for ye canna wear them except outside."

"A body doesna buy cloaks to be wearin' at them steady," retorted Jess.

"No, no, but you could never wear yours though ye had ane."

"I dinna want ane. They're far ower grand for the like o' me."

"They're no nae sic thing. Am thinkin' ye're juist as fit to wear an eleven and a bit as My Hobart."

"Weel, mebbe I am, but it's oot o' the queestion gettin' ane, they're sic a price."

"Ay, an' though we had the siller, it would surely be an awfu' like thing to buy a cloak 'at ye could never wear?"

"Ou, but I dinna want ane."

Jess spoke so mournfully that Hendry became enraged.

"It's most mighty," he said, "'at ye would gang an' set yer heart on sic a completely useless thing."

"I hinna set my heart on't."

"Dinna blether. Ye've been speakin' aboot thae eleven and a bits to Leeby, aff an' on, for twa month."

Then Hendry hobbled off to his loom, and Jess gave me a look which meant that men are trying at the best, once you are tied to them.

The cloaks continued to turn up in conversation, and Hendry poured scorn upon Jess's weakness, telling her she would be better employed mending his trousers than brooding over an eleven and a bit that would have to spend its life in a drawer. An outsider would have thought that Hendry was positively cruel to Jess. He seemed to take a delight in finding that she had neglected to sew a button on his waistcoat. His real joy, however, was the knowledge that she sewed as no other woman in Thrums could sew. Jess had a genius for making new garments out of old ones, and Hendry never tired of gloating over her cleverness so long as she was not present. He was always athirst for fresh proofs of it, and these were forthcoming every day. Sparing were his words of praise to herself, but in the evening he generally had a smoke with me in the attic, and then the thought of Jess made him chuckle till his pipe went out. When he smoked he grunted as if in pain, though this really added to the enjoyment.

"It doesna matter," he would say to me, "what Jess turns her hand to, she can mak ony mortal thing. She doesna need nae teachin'; na, juist gie her a guid look at onything, be it clothes, or furniture, or in the bakin' line, it's all the same to her. She'll mak another exactly like it. Ye canna beat her. Her bannocks is so superior 'at a Tilliedrum woman took to her bed after tastin' them, an' when the lawyer has company his wife gets Jess to mak some bannocks for her an' syne pretends they're her ain bakin'. Ay, there's a story aboot that. One day the auld doctor, him 'at's deid, was at his tea at the lawyer's, an' says the guidwife, 'Try the cakes, Mr. Riach; they're my own bakin'.' Weel, he was a fearsomely outspoken man, the doctor, an' nae suner had he the bannock atween his teeth, for he didna stop to swallow't, than he says, 'Mistress Geddie,' says he, 'I wasna born on a Sabbath. Na, na, you're no the first grand leddy 'at has gien me bannocks as their ain bakin' 'at was baked and fired by Jess Logan, her 'at's Hendry McQumph's wife.' Ay, they say the lawyer's wife didna ken which wy to look, she was that mortified. It's juist the same wi' sewin'. There's wys o' ornamentin' christenin' robes an' the like 'at's kent to naebody but hersel; an' as for stockin's, weel, though I've seen her mak sae mony, she amazes me yet. I mind o' a furry waistcoat I aince had. Weel, when it was fell dune, do you think she gae it awa to some gaen aboot body (vagrant)? Na, she made it into a richt neat coat

to Jamie, wha was a bit laddie at the time. When he grew out o' it, she made a slipbody o't for hersel. Ay, I dinna ken a' the different things it became, but the last time I saw it was ben in the room, whaur she'd covered a footstool wi' 't. Yes, Jess is the cleverest crittur I ever saw. Leeby's handy, but she's no a patch on her mother."

I sometimes repeated these panegyrics to Jess. She merely smiled, and said that the men haver most terrible when they are not at their work.

Hendry tried Jess sorely over the cloaks, and a time came when, only by exasperating her, could he get her to reply to his sallies.

"Wha wants an eleven an' a bit?" she retorted now and again.

"It's you 'at wants it," said Hendry, promptly.

"Did I ever say I wanted ane? What use could I hae for't?"

"That's the queestion," said Hendry. "Ye canna gang the length o' the door, so ye would never be able to wear't."

"Ay, weel," replied Jess, "I'll never hae the chance o' no bein' able to wear't, for, hooever muckle I wanted it, I couldna get it."

Jess's infatuation had in time the effect of making Hendry uncomfortable. In the attic he delivered himself of such sentiments as these:

"There's nae understandin' a woman. There's Jess 'at hasna her equal for cleverness in Thrums, man or woman, an' yet she's fair skeered about thae cloaks. Aince a woman sets her mind on something to wear, she's mair onreasonable than the stupidest man. Ay, it micht mak them humble to see hoo foolish they are syne. No, but it doesna do't.

"If it was a thing to be useful noo, I wouldna think the same o't, but she could never wear't. She kens she could never wear't, an' yet she's juist as keen to hae't.

"I dinna like to see her so wantin' a thing, an' no able to get it. But it's an awfu' sum, eleven an' a bit."

He tried to argue with her further.

"If ye had eleven an' a bit to fling awa," he said, "ye dinna mean to tell me 'at ye would buy a cloak instead o' cloth for a gown, or flannel for petticoats, or some useful thing?"

"As sure as death," said Jess, with unwonted vehemence, "if a cloak I could get, a cloak I would buy."

Hendry came up to tell me what Jess had said.

"It's a mighty infatooation," he said, "but it shows hoo her heart's set on thae cloaks."

"Aince ye had it," he argued with her, "ye would juist hae to lock it awa in the drawers. Ye would never even be seein' 't."

"Ay, would I," said Jess. "I would often tak it oot an' look at it. Ay, an' I would aye ken it was there."

"But naebody would ken ye had it but yersel," said Hendry, who had a vague notion that this was a telling objection.

"Would they no?" answered Jess. "It would be a' through the toon afore nicht."

"Weel, all I can say," said Hendry, "is 'at ye're terrible foolish to tak the want o' sic a useless thing to heart."

"Am no takkin' 't to heart," retorted Jess, as usual.

Jess needed many things in her days that poverty kept from her to the end, and the cloak was merely a luxury. She would soon have let it slip by as something unattainable had not Hendry encouraged it to rankle in her mind. I cannot say when he first determined that Jess should have a cloak, come the money as it liked, for he was too ashamed of his weakness to admit his project to me. I remember, however, his saying to Jess one day:

"I'll warrant you could mak a cloak yersel the marrows o' thae eleven and a bits, at half the price?"

"It would cost," said Jess, "sax an' saxpence, exactly. The cloth would be five shillins, an' the beads a shillin'. I have some braid 'at would do fine for the front, but the buttons would be sax-pence."

"Ye're sure o' that?"

"I ken fine, for I got Leeby to price the things in the shop."

"Ay, but it maun be ill to shape the cloaks richt. There was a queer cut about that ane Peter Dickie's new wife had on."

"Queer cut or no queer cut," said Jess, "I took the shape o' My Hobart's ane the day she was here at her tea, an' I could mak the identical o't for sax and sax."

"I dinna believe't," said Hendry, but when he and I were alone he told me, "There's no a doubt she could mak it. Ye heard her say she had ta'en the shape? Ay, that shows she's rale set on a cloak."

Had Jess known that Hendry had been saving up for months to buy her material for a cloak, she would not have let him do it. She could not know, however, for all the time he was scraping together his pence, he kept up a ring-ding-dang about her folly. Hendry gave Jess all the wages he weaved, except threepence weekly, most of which went in tobacco and snuff. The dulseman had perhaps a halfpenny from him in the fortnight. I noticed that for a long time Hendry neither smoked nor snuffed, and I knew that for years he had carried a shilling in his snuff-mull. The remainder of the money he must have made by extra work at his loom, by working harder, for he could scarcely have worked longer.

It was one day shortly before Jamie's return to Thrums that Jess saw Hendry pass the house and go down the brae when he ought to have come in to his brose. She sat at the window watching for him, and by and by he reappeared, carrying a parcel.

"Whaur on earth hae ye been?" she asked, "an' what's that you're carryin'?"

"Did ye think it was an eleven an' a bit?" said Hendry.

"No, I didna," answered Jess, indignantly.

Then Hendry slowly undid the knots of the string with which the parcel was tied. He took off the brown paper.

"There's yer cloth," he said, "an' here's one an' saxpence for the beads an' the buttons."

While Jess still stared he followed me ben the house.

"It's a terrible haver," he said, apologetically, "but she had set her heart on't."